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ABSTRACT

This report attempts to present an overview of the problem of student activism. There are four different alienated student groups: (1) the New Left activists, (2) the advocates of Black Power, (3) the Hippies, and (4) the Third World Liberation Front. Each group is discussed and the difference between previous difficulties and present day difficulties is considered. The reasons for today's problem of student unrest being so different and so difficult is twofold: (1) the peculiar nature of youth today as affected by historical forces, (2) the opening up of schools beyond their essentially intellectual function to a direct and reciprocal contact with society and conflict. One marked difference between yesterday and today's alienated youth is the level of hostility directed toward existing institutions. Concerning the second point on the role of schools, three main points are made: (1) educator's need to discover the fine line between talking and doing, (2) this line must be nurtured into healthy vigor and its centrality to the community must be explained, and (3) channels for active involvement in community affairs must be provided through outside organizations. A total of nine specific suggestions of how schools might take the initiative in involving students in constructive ways are given. (Author/KJ)

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A PERSPECTIVE ON ACTIVISM

For some time now the heat and clamor of the student protest movement has been striking the School Establishment across the country. The mass media, ranging from local newspapers to national television, vividly detail the action. Sociologists and second-guessers alike list multitudes of reasons for the phenomena. With such attention student activism, were it any ordinary mortal movement, would be by now immobilized beard-deep in a sea of words.

But the movement continues along at least temporarily due to the mystique of youth, that extra-mortal dimension of vitality which youth possesses and which adults simultaneously tolerate and admire. So rhetoric, essay, edict and research study still flow forth unrelentingly. Everyone has an opinion but few solutions are compatible.

If somehow we now could cleave to the heart of this problem about student activism, it would merit considerable notice ... say a five minute comment from Marshall McLuhan or at least a short article by Hugh Hefner. Perhaps this is asking too much. But we should make an effort. With some reliance upon collective experience, we must look beyond the crosscurrents of contemporary confusion to basic considerations. It is time to step back and get a broader overview of our present posture and the options for the immediate future. This is, then, in essence, a second generation essay on student activism, an attempt to gain a general perspective to guide us with particular problems.

We all know of at least four different alienated student groups: (1) the New Left activists, (2) the advocates of Black Power, (3) the

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By Scott D. Thomson, Superintendent, Evanston Township High School, Evanston, Illinois, April 1969

CG004 805

Hippies, and (4) the Third World Liberation Front. All make headlines but each is a unique group. The hippies are largely a-political. They have dropped out, separating themselves from a society considered grossly competitive and hopelessly materialistic. Hippies are heavily involved with drugs, with mysticism, and with communal living. The movement is diminishing rapidly, perhaps due to the fashion world which appropriated for middle-aged matrons many trappings of hippism.

The New Left activists, in contrast, are deeply committed to political action. They want change, the more radical desiring revolutionary change. They organize protests and engage heavily in political education. They tolerate hippies but scorn them as whimsical, not to be counted on for the tough in-fighting. Activists plan to reshape society by assaulting schools and gaining power. Hippies flee from power.

Another group, the advocates of Black Power, sometimes form alliances with the activists. However, most Black Power leaders are extremely cautious about white influence and will accept assistance only with skepticism. The Black Power students of high school age concentrate on specific issues of race such as proposals for Afro-American curriculum, the hiring of black teachers and administrators, the purchase of black products, the display of black art, etc. Black Power groups have tended to become increasingly demanding of "White Institutions." Black initiative seems the order of the day. In the meantime, charges of racism against schools can best be handled by Review Committees consisting of parents, teachers and students of both races to review charges of discrimination and to make recommendations to the principal. The principal alone, if he is white, will probably not be trusted and may find himself immobilized by impasse between black student and white student or black student and white teacher. The Review or "Cool It" Committee could handle complaints from everyone in the school community: students, teachers, secretaries, custodians and parents.

The Third World Liberation Front, a relatively new group, resulted from a partnership of the more radical black and white students into a united front for "The rights of all oppressed peoples." Because they are almost exclusively political revolutionaries, this group's influence at the high school level may not develop.....until next year!!

Each movement enshrines its intellectual heroes. The New Left loves Sartre for his Nihilistic view of Existentialism, Che Guevara for a consuming personal commitment to revolution against privilege, Herbert Marcuse for dissecting contemporary institutions, and Ho Chi Minh for embarrassing a computerized Pentagon. The Black activists worship W.E.B. Du Bois for a prophetic insight into the condition of the Black man in America; they revere Malcolm X for publicly challenging the superiority of whites; and they respect Stokely Carmichael for popularizing the movement. For the Third World people, Eldridge Cleaver and Mao Tse-tung are saints to save all non-whites everywhere. And of course our Hippies are dedicated to Papa Pot and Mama Meth.

Always there has been and will be a generation gap, because, as Eric Sevareid points out, youth have a one dimensional vision, a view of the present as contrasted to the ideal, only, while adults have a three dimensional vision gained by living in the past, by possessing broader views of the present, and also, together with youth, by seeing the ideal ahead. Nor does the generation gap alone cause student unrest. No one, and especially school personnel, is unmoved by the manifold problems which confront and surround our institutions.

What then makes the current problem of student unrest so different and so difficult? The answer can be found in two areas: (1) the peculiar nature of youth today as affected by historical forces, and (2) the opening up of schools beyond their essentially intellectual function to a direct and reciprocal contact with society and conflict.

One peculiar quality of today's alienated youth as contrasted to past generations is the level of hostility directed toward existing institutions. The distressing emotionalism found in the more radical activists probably arises first from an alienation against liberal ideals (research indicates that most activists have liberal-permissive parents), followed by a brief Nihilism, and then, in a search for security, radicalism. This process results in commitment to a world unborn and, in actuality, unknown. That is why activists have such difficulties describing the society they desire. Their goal is some inversion of contemporary practice but specific definitions escape them. Note that the radical revolutionist's point of departure is his alienation from traditional democratic liberalism. The radical's belief that he possesses the foolproof antidote for the defects of liberalism obviously disassociates him from being the reformist liberal that he is seen as being by some commentators. The activist contempt for liberals as fuzzy-headed functionaries unsure of Truth and the activist obsession with gaining goals by all means at hand, to include intimidation and force, illustrate his alienation not only from the routine institutions of democratic liberalism but also from its central political values as well.

We have all been slow to see this. As President Goheen of Princeton University comments, "Some of us, including some of the faculty and myself, in the past, have been a bit naive about the actual role of the extreme radical left. Even now we want to be very careful not to oversimplify.... But some of these radicals are real political provocateurs.... Among the advocates of student power there are some who are for an ideology different from ours; who don't really care about improving education...."

As a result of this new level of alienation, some interesting traits occur in the personalities of activists, for instance, the disgust of the alienated with the social consequences of technology.

Activists feel that older generations have worshiped unabashedly the machine, ignoring consequences to man and nature. They feel technology must be tamed. They feel today's world to be dehumanized and destructive. They feel it will not long survive unless the course is changed.

A corollary of this attitude is the alienation of many activists from the future as they see it. Most are disinterested and unsuccessful in math and science. They are aware that an increasing prestige goes with success in technology, everything from cigarette ads to the federal budget attests to that. So they tend to feel threatened by a future in which their own personal worth could be questioned. They fear being surplus, discredited and obsolete.

To aware, articulate youth every defect in the fabric of life is clearly observable. But the dedication to finding solutions for these problems within democratic values is missing. Thus we have created a modern Sophist, one who can ridicule with brilliance society's awkwardness in dealing with injustice but a person who lacks a solution save one based on impatient force. We have developed the intellectual equivalent of the high-powered racing car to run on the back roads of life. So the activist makes his own freeways of protest because of an overriding obsession with goals. He replaces a commitment to democratic process with a commitment to self and to his personal concept of the future. And since process is the life-blood of democracy, the implications are serious. The task for schools, then, clearly is to show that reform through a thorough understanding and a vigorous application of traditional democratic values to changing institutions is more constructive than revolution. This will require all the imaginative leadership and courage that teachers, administrators and parents can muster.

Now to the second main point in this overview of activism: the

relationship of schools to community problems and especially the opening up of schools to become centers of overt action. This strikes to the heart of our present difficulties, these difficulties to a large degree being caused by an intimate involvement of the school campus with political and social forces whirling about the general community.

Obviously students should become involved in a discussion of crucial issues, the military draft for instance. But should students organize on campus as active proponents or opponents of this law with the objective of affecting politically this law? Obviously students should discuss and debate thoroughly the race question, environmental pollution, foreign policy, the adequacy of party primaries, the Electoral College, and other pressing issues. But should not a delicate line exist between discussion on the one hand and action on the other? And should not this delicate line be placed between the school on the one hand and the community on the other? As Bruno Bettelheim of the University of Chicago states so clearly, "The purpose of a university is to <u>study</u> revolt, not to engage in it; to <u>examine</u> how peace may be won and maintained, not to crusade against war; to <u>investigate</u> and plan for social reforms, not to carry them out." The central objective of a school or a university is to study every possible question but to fight for only one cause, freedom of inquiry and openness of thought.

It seems that as educators our immediate task is clear. We must first find this fragile line between talking and doing, between ideas on the one hand and on the other hand action on community affairs. (Obviously we act on <u>school</u> affairs.) Then we must nurture this line into healthy vigor and explain its centrality to the community. Then finally, we must step forward and provide channels to outside organizations for those students who want an active involvement in the promotion of causes in the broader

community, the actual working for any ideal ranging from tutoring the underprivileged to influencing foreign policy.

Schools cannot be separated from society, nor am I advocating that. And schools must be relevant. We do at school, to reinterpret Professor Counts, "Dare to Build a New Social Order"... but one of ideas, not of implementation. That is the job of the larger community and a task with which schools cannot become involved and still maintain their special atmosphere of free thought, their security from political pressures, their contemplation devoid of immediate conflict, and their privilege of partial self-government by Educational Code.

Those zealots who want students to play at school all the games of the adult world, under the aegis of civil rights, simply do not understand the Pandora's Box they are attempting so righteously to unlock. To assign to the school campus open programs of action could result in a disastrous sequence of events against reflective thought and would give opportunity for manipulating youth for any cause, "true and bold."

During a hearing on student activism in Palo Alto, California, last spring, I was particularly struck by the position taken by the American Civil Liberties Union. The local chapter of the ACLU argued that a broad and active involvement with society by students <u>at school</u> is essential to modern education. But in reality is political activism the safeguard of freedom, or is advocacy? Certainly the Red Guards of Mao Tse-tung are active. And, considering involvement, Hitler's youth groups were involved to the point of being glassy-eyed. What involvement were they denied? None. What freedom did they safeguard? None. Might not, therefore, the chief safeguard of the preservation of democracy be unfettered ideas and lively debate? And the best safeguard for free debate are schools where young people may explore ideas in the best possible intellectual environment, apart

from emotionalism, activism, and intimidation.

One genius of American public education has been its freedom from political control. Remove the delicate line between thought and action, and you invite eventual control by partisan bodies. Then youth can be used more easily. And youth is an impressive political force as history illustrates from the ancient Spartans to a very modern Mao.

Believing this, I also feel strongly that schools do have a direct responsibility, especially today, to help interested students to become involved with a full range of ideas at school and to become personally involved actively <u>out in the community</u> off the school campus. Each school should have a community counselor who works with community agencies to include political bodies, to make certain students have easy and immediate access to these groups. Each school should promote programs that will attract the activist student and afford him opportunities to release his energy into constructive rather than obstructive channels.

The central point is that the old ways are not good enough. Just talking and listening will not do the job: Today's student wants action. Traditional extracurricular programs will not suffice: Today's student wants social involvement. Benevolence will fall short: Today's student wants a piece of the power. Here are nine suggestions of how the school might take the initiative in involving students in constructive ways.

1. Student protesters invariably assert that the curriculum is irrelevant, that subjects have no meaning. To meet this criticism, why not schedule special days with student-planned curriculum? Let your student council take charge for a two- or three-hour period once a month. Have them set up a curriculum committee, composed in part of adult advisers, to scan proposed courses. Establish a student administrative committee to schedule classes.

The curriculum committee might print application forms so that any student or faculty member may propose a course relatively easily. Offerings might include symposia on drugs or alcoholism, seminars on the stock market, guest speakers on the biological revolution, scuba diving in the swimming pool, a discussion of UFO's, or poetry reading. The only limit to the curriculum is the creativity of the students.

Only a few restrictions need be imposed: (1) Faculty members should be present at the classes. (2) No denominational religious or other prohibited instruction ought to be offered. (3) Commercial entertainment, such as popular films, ought to be restricted. (4) No four-letter words or similar examples of bad taste should be allowed.

Cubberley HS in Palo Alto, California, offered such a program in the spring of 1967 and again in 1968. The first year's program is fully described in the December 1967 issue of the NASSP Bulletin in an article entitled "Idea Forum." The regular school day was telescoped into 30-minute periods and the balance of time was devoted to the Idea Forum. Other schools have sponsored similar programs and called them "Educational Fairs."

This approach not only gives students an opportunity to present classes but also provides the sobering experience of managing a program and of producing relevancy rather than just grandly talking about it.

2. Students want involvement with community needs. What better way is there to accomplish this than by volunteer work? Most schools leave this to happenstance but wiser schools plan for it. The New Trier High Schools in suburban Chicago employ a full-time coordinator of Volunteer Bureaus. Any student who wants to get involved with worthwhile community work can attach himself at school to one of over 30 volunteer working groups, all of which include other students. The range of opportunity includes tutoring, inner-city project work, hospital work, recreation assistance, helping the handi-

capped and aged, and performing special work as the need arises. No student at New Trier need feel uninvolved or unwanted.

3. The more politically-minded activists will want to "do their thing" against the Establishment. Mostly they will want to speak out to an audience about the Establishment's alleged "hypocrisy" and "inhumanity." To accommodate this drive, provide an open microphone (restricted to students and teachers) once a week, at which time students are allowed to speak out on issues they think are important. Experience shows that the more angry student dominates the microphone at first, but that by the third or fourth session the silent majority begins to step forward and assert itself. The significance of this fact alone is well worth the risk. Naturally, profanity or appeals to subvert the law should not be tolerated, and any speaker who abuses the privilege should lose access to the microphone.

4. Many activists have no real understanding of the legal and financial structure of school systems. As a result, student activists often ignore the complex relationship among the board of education, superintendent, principal, and teachers. They should, therefore, be exposed to this relationship and the varied responsibilities of these people in such a way as to clarify their own place in the system as students. As an example, the Lake Oswego, Oregon, schools have initiated a program entitled "Telesis," which allows students the opportunity to elect board members and to manage the school system under authentic conditions. This means that students are forced to act within the restrictions of state law and of public opinion. In this way, the place, prerogatives, and limitations of each group associated with the school become clear.

5. Overnight retreats of students and adults can be most beneficial. Prolonged periods of discussion and a joint sharing of meals tends to reduce much superficial hostility. Professional roles--assumed for purposes of

the school day--can be shed, differences of opinion stemming from generation or race can be grappled with, and more candid communication established. With this done, the issues central to student-faculty-administrator cooperation are more easily identifiable and programs to resolve conflict can then begin. This technique is unusually effective but should be employed on a 24-hour basis or longer.

6. Schools on a modular schedule are in a particularly advantageous position to devise programs that will obviate student protest. Mini-courses, lasting in duration from one week to a semester, can be developed for unscheduled time. Such courses could be proposed by students or faculty, be approved by a student/faculty committee, and published on a weekly basis. This approach brings together students and teachers with similar interests--possibly ranging from mountain climbing to guitar playing--and allows an exploration of these interests until curiosity is satisfied. Since relevancy is the counterpoint of curiosity, involvement should be high. These courses would ordinarily be without credit or grades.

7. Student clubs might sponsor the appearance of controversial speakers without adverse public reaction <u>if</u> the principle of balance is maintained. Where hot political issues such as Vietnam or the draft are discussed, the school must require that a wide variety of viewpoints be presented; a panel discussion or debate is the most convenient vehicle for this. Schools must be firm in not allowing an activist group to propagandize on campus. Schools are educational institutions, dedicated to a fair consideration of all viewpoints, not the propagation of one position by any one student or adult group. Schools, like the courts, should be non-partisan. And since teachers are restricted from partisan political activity on campus, why then should students be allowed this privilege?

8. A rising interest in philosophy and in comparative religion

should be honored by establishing classes in these subjects. Funded by the Carnegie Foundation and sponsored by the Central States College Association, ten schools in the Midwest, to include Evanston Township High School, are currently teaching a semester course in philosophy. Now in its first year the experiment appears to be successful with enthusiastic and full classes, each enrolled from heterogeneous student populations. The experiment will continue next year.

9. Finally, don't forget the time-tested value of including students on various school committees, and this includes policy, curriculum, and PTA groups. Student advice is fresh and imaginative if not consistently profound.

A militant minority of students may remain untouched by these efforts. However, the vast majority of students will almost assuredly react positively. Most students will see that schools are open, changing institutions, that schools do want to be responsive, and that cooperation pays greater dividends than conflict. Students will also learn that the democratic process of proposing, discussing, and acting in concert with other groups will in the long run result in greater gains than will hostile confrontations. Perhaps they will also begin to see, through personal involvement with their community and by playing new roles within their own school, that the old classroom courses have suddenly gained a new relevancy.

Schools and school principals may have little to do with the appearance of alienated activists. The home, the mass media, modern literature, affluence, and mobility are beyond our schoolmaster's rod. But educators are guilty of slipping into the position of sponsoring activism if they allow it on campus. Perhaps educators lacked a rationale to combat the activist thrust. Perhaps this one makes sense. And incidently, demonstrations which in any way impede the school operation or the rights of individual

students to attend classes I consider to be action, not thought.

One final point. Schools are for ideas. The classroom and campus are accorded the special task in our society of nourishing intellectual growth. Schools are the custodians of a precious commodity, the fragile flask of academic freedom. Too much heat and pressure can pop the cork and shatter the container. Professor Charles Frankel of Columbia University writes that the supreme obligation of educators is to protect the freedom to teach and to learn. Teachers and administrators must be "intolerant of intolerance" according to Frankel. The rules of civilization must be protected. If we lose the struggle for rational discourse in the schools, how will we maintain it in the larger society? "If we lose this struggle, what will the youth of the future say to us? Youth will not thank us for equivocating about the values of civilized conduct. I think most youth know this. It is for teachers and administrators to make it plain that we know it too, and we mean to make it work." This, I believe, strikes to the center of the problem.